

Rare Corn Variety “Discovered” In South Carolina

A rare heirloom corn variety developed on Thomas Jefferson’s farm in the early 1800’s has been located on a small South Carolina farm. Cokes Prolific Corn has been grown continuously for the last 70 years by 95-year-old Manning Farmer, who lives near Landrum. Seedsmen across the country thought the variety had been extinct since the mid-1940’s. It was discovered after a 30-year search by Dr. David Shields, a University of South Carolina professor who heads a foundation that identifies, catalogs and returns heirloom foods to production.

To locate the missing variety, Shields had posted on his Facebook page for information on the “10 Most Wanted Lost Southern Foods”. Angie Lavezzo of the Sow True Seed Company saw the post and wrote Shields saying she’d bought a white dent called Cox Prolific on Craigslist and wondered if it was the same variety. The two arranged to meet Farmer, who was the seller, and learn how he came to grow the corn. “We were amazed to find he’d been growing it continuously since the 1930’s,” Shields says.

After their meeting Shields contacted the Jefferson Library and received confirmation

that the corn variety was indeed developed by John Hartwell Cokes, one of Jefferson’s lead gardeners at Monticello. It soon became one of the leading corn varieties in the South because of its reliable high yields and outstanding flavor when used for grits. As other varieties became more popular, Cokes Prolific fell out of use during WWII.

Shields says he was surprised to learn that Farmer had last purchased new Cokes seed in the 1930’s. Farmer worked his land for years with mules, planting the corn in 40-in. rows on small fields amounting to about 16 acres. He harvested and re-used the seed every year and knew it was pure because other corn wasn’t grown nearby. Now he uses a small tractor for tillage and planting, but Cokes Prolific remains his seed corn of choice.

Shields says Cokes Prolific isn’t sweet corn, but the open-pollinated variety can be eaten right off the ear for a couple days right after pollination. After that it becomes too tough. The soft dent variety matures in 112 to 115 days, producing white flint corn kernels that are ideal for grinding into meal and hominy grits. The variety produces two or more extra-long ears



South Carolina’s Manning Farmer (left) has been growing Cokes Prolific corn continuously for more than 70 years. It produces white flint corn kernels ideal for grinding into meal and hominy grits. Manning’s son Darryl is pictured with him.

per stalk and grows about 6 to 7 ft. tall.

Farmer sells Cokes Prolific seed for \$15 a pint or \$25 a quart. Packets are also available online from Angie Lavezzo at Sow True Seed in Asheville, North Carolina.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Dr. David Shields, University of South Carolina (dsheilds@mailbox.sc.edu) or Sow True Seed (ph 828 254-0708; www.sowtrueseed.com).

St. Augustine Sheep Geared To Southern Heat

Finding a sheep breed that produces quality meat with parasitic resistance and that can handle heat is a challenge for Florida farmers. That’s why Ron Taber spent about 15 years developing the St. Augustine breed, starting in the late 1990s.

After raising wool breeds in Washington, he and his wife, Ruth, moved to Florida to live in a nicer climate. They became familiar with hair breeds during a trip to Zimbabwe, Africa, so they purchased Barbados Blackbelly and St. Croix ewes. The problem was they were small and it took too much time to get lambs to market weight. Ron liked the size and qualities of the Dorper, which came to the states from South Africa in the mid 1990’s, but it had parasite problems. So, they started breeding Dorper rams to his St. Croix ewes.

“Our goal was to have good meat fairly quickly,” Ruth says. The muscle on the

Dorper is outstanding. The St. Croix hair sheep have much better parasite resistance, and the ewes are good mothers.”

Ron bred back their first offspring with St. Croix rams, did line breeding, and kept the best ewes to build up his flock. He named the breed after the saint, whose writings he studied and respected.

Ron died in 2004, but Ruth continues his work, saving the best ewes for breeding and selling lambs directly to customers.

“St. Augustine sheep are easy to handle with nice temperaments - including the rams. I select for temperament,” she says. “They flock well together when moved from field to field.”

The St. Augustine breed consistently has twins and works well for an accelerated lambing schedule of every 8 mos. Thanks to the St. Croix genetics, they come in a variety of colors. Most have hair that starts to fall off

in February. Some have a strip of wool on the back from Dorper genetics.

Taber raises her flock on 56 acres of year-round grass and supplements with corn and soybean meal in dry or cold periods. Ewes weigh about 150 lbs. and lambs wean at 55 lbs. in 60 days. By 90 days they weigh 65 lbs. or more and are ready to market.

Taber sells her lambs live to ethnic market customers and breeds ewes once a year so that 70 to 90-lb. rams will be ready for the Muslim feasts of Ramadan and Eid Mubarak. She also sells to Hispanic and Greek customers.

About a year ago, she set up the St. Augustine Sheep Association to recruit growers and promote the breed. Ewes that have lambed once sell for \$350. Currently Taber has about 100 ewes that she and a hired hand care for.

She will gladly talk about the breed to interested sheep producers.



St. Augustine sheep come in a variety of colors and are bred to handle Florida’s climate.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, St. Augustine Hair Sheep Association, Calovine Farm, 15205 W. Hwy. 316, Williston, Fla. 32696 (ph 352 528-4843; www.staugustinehairsheep.com; ruthtaber@embarqmail.com).

He Turns Farm Trees Into Family Heirlooms

“I regard every log as a gift. I cut each one for character, and each one has a unique fingerprint hidden inside. It’s my privilege to open it up and expose that beauty for others,” says James Dykema as he describes the process of transforming tree logs into family heirlooms at his Willmar, Minn. sawmill. His 2 primary products are dining tables and fireplace mantles. Each work-of-art includes a complete history of the piece branded into the underside.

Dykema started his Three Fingers Sawmill operation in 2008 when he decided that he’d had enough of over-the-road trucking. “I bought a sawmill that was for sale in Wisconsin, got a 10-minute lesson on how to operate it, and just started cutting,” he says. “I had no idea how to turn logs into furniture, so I just sort of invented my own methods and style.”

What makes Dykema’s business unique is that he specializes in making tables and mantles from trees that have meaning to his customers.

“There are a lot of Century Farms here in Minnesota, and the younger generation likes the idea of furniture made from the tree grandfather planted on the farm. We brand the underside of each table or mantle with the complete history of where the tree came from, the kind of wood, and then each family member signs his or her name. Each customer becomes part of the heirloom project.”

One of Dykema’s favorite projects involved a batch of aromatic cedar trees from a Minnesota church where a woman’s grandfather had planted the trees. “They were beautiful logs, and we ended up making a number of furniture pieces for members of the family, and for the church where the cedar trees stood for generations.”

One of the challenges of cutting heirloom trees, Dykema says, is the metal found in the logs. “Many of these trees have nails, screws, wire, bullets, horseshoes or other metal in them. One sawyer I know found a 7-lb. cannonball embedded in a trunk. But that’s part of the beauty of this business, to



James Dykema specializes in making tables from trees that have meaning to his customers. His 2 primary products are dining tables and fireplace mantles.

be able to tell the story that granddad used to shoe horses underneath the tree that this table was made from.”

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